

Salt

By Sonja Condit

The sound struck Jill Norwood's mind like a brilliant light. She opened her eyes, dazzled with lightning-blindness, a hot purple cloud; she fell out of bed, took three steps, and tripped over the laundry basket before she realized that the room was in fact dark. She rubbed the heel of her right hand, bruised in her fall, and listened. The sound plunged and fluttered through her head, beating wild frantic wings. Smoke alarm. She ran into the kitchen to find the fire.

The vinyl floor was so cold that her toes curled up from it. Fire? There was no fire. Yellow light filtered through the kitchen window from the parking lot, but it was the same lifeless light as always; no flames jumped in it. She sniffed the air for smoke, smelling only the unwashed dishes in the sink and the grapey whiff of the cough medicine that had splashed on the floor when Skyler fussily pushed it away.

The smoke alarm flashed and screamed in the chilly room, and Jill yanked it from the wall. The display scrolled in block letters: WARNING CARBON MONOXIDE DANGER WARNING VACATE AND VENTILATE AREA WARNING CARBON MONOXIDE . . . She turned it over and pulled out the batteries. It stopped screaming.

Ever since the last electric bill came, Jill had kept her thermostat at fifty and heated her bedroom at night with her grandmother's old kerosene heater. She took Skyler into her bed to keep him warm; he'd been having one cold after another for the last few months, and slept badly. But the alarm hadn't shaken him. How could anyone sleep through that noise?

Jill ran back to the bedroom and pulled the plug of the kerosene heater from the wall. "Skyler?" she said. "Are you awake? Skyler, honey? Skyler. Wake up."

She pulled him upright and he slumped in her arms, warm and boneless. In the reflected light from the kitchen, his face was as white as old silver. He dragged a breath painfully inward, and his lungs gurgled and crackled; slowly he released it, and reached for another even more slowly. Jill scuffed her feet into her sneakers, pulled her coat on over the sweats she slept in, shoved Skyler's slippers over his toes, and carried him out to the car, blankets and all.

The hospital was only ten minutes away. She listened for Skyler's breaths and counted them, just as she had counted her own breaths when Todd drove her to the hospital, four years ago last week. "Breathe, honey, keep breathing," she said – the very words Todd had said to her. "Just hold on, we're almost there."

She parked in the taxi bay and ran into the emergency room with Skyler and all his blankets, shouting, "My baby can't breathe!" and the nurses boiled around her like red ants whose nest had been kicked. "It's carbon monoxide," said Jill.

"No, it isn't," said one of the nurses. She stood only two inches taller than Jill but weighed twice as much, and Jill immediately distrusted her: women of this shape, dense rocklike cubes compacted of hard fat, were the kind who went through the express checkout with a full cart, or handed over a dozen expired coupons and demanded they be honored. But this woman's voice was steady and calm, and her hands flew; she unrolled Skyler from his blankets, propped him up at the raised head of the emergency room bed, and took his pulse. "He'd be bright pink if it was carbon monoxide."

"But the alarm went off."

"It's set to go off long before there's enough gas in the air to hurt anyone," the nurse said. "But he's not breathing so good, is he? What's your name, little guy? I'm Nurse Deniqua."

Skyler shook his head. He was awake, but not as Jill had ever seen him. His eyes were open, but with a far look; his face, usually so bright and lively, hung empty of expression and thought. "Skyler," she said. "Sky. Look at me." He looked, but without recognition, without love. The thing that looked at her in Skyler's eyes was a thing of the inhuman past, a creature that buried itself in mud to hide from the daylight, something older than the reptiles, duller than the fish; it stared at her from the stagnant depths. She gripped his shoulders to shake the life back into him, and the nurse's strong hands held her still.

"You don't want to do that, Mom," said Deniqua. "Shaking. That's one of the things we have to report. You let me do my work, now."

"What's wrong with him?"

"We'll find out. Can you take a deep breath for Nurse Deniqua, little guy?" When she leaned forward, her glossy straightened hair moved all of a piece, like a helmet. Skyler's mouth opened, but Jill couldn't tell if he took a deep breath, or any breath at all. "How about another one?" Deniqua said, frowning, her square hand spread on Skyler's back. Jill suddenly yearned for the touch of that clean bronze hand, with the perfect French nails and the odor of baby powder; if Nurse Deniqua would take her hand, she could catch her spinning thoughts, just as Skyler seemed to catch his breath.

Deniqua smiled, as if she felt the brush of Jill's thought. "We'll have a doctor in here in just a minute, Mom," she said, patting Jill's arm; and in less than a minute, the hospital machine closed around Skyler Norwood. Doctor followed doctor, machine followed machine; they gave him oxygen, adrenaline, steroids; they put him on inhalers and nebulizers; they sent him for X-rays; they took samples of his spit, his blood, a

swab from the back of his throat and another from his anus, and more blood. Someone put a needle in his right hand and taped it down. Someone else took it out and put a different needle in his left hand. The doctors came and went, and Deniqua was the only constant. She came back just in time to prevent another nurse from taking the needle from Skyler's left hand and putting a new one on the right. "The little guy's hands aren't that big, honey," she said, and from then on she stayed close to Skyler's bed. She clipped something like a plastic clothespin onto Skyler's left forefinger, explaining that this was the monitor that measured the oxygen in his blood.

The only good news that Jill heard came in Deniqua's voice. "Seventy-five," said Deniqua, "that's low, but it's stable," and an hour later, "Just above eighty. He's getting better, Mom." As Deniqua read the numbers, Skyler's cheeks turned pink, and the far look sank back into the depths of his eyes, the slimy ancient thing burying itself once more; Jill would not believe – would not even listen – when any of the doctors tried to read the numbers to her. Only Deniqua knew. "Ninety-three," said Deniqua, and Skyler whooped, yanked the clip off his finger, leaped from the bed, and raced down the hall, sliding on the vinyl floor in his slippers, just as he loved to do in the kitchen at home.

"He's back, Mom," said Deniqua, and Jill had to agree. She wrangled him back into the bed and left him in Deniqua's care while she went out to move her car out of the taxi bay to a legal spot in the parking tower.

When she came back, Skyler was holding court in bed, with Deniqua his queen. She had brought him an ice cream sandwich and a hot dog, and the other nurses gathered with their offerings of crayons, coloring books and toy cars from the lost and found. Skyler graciously accepted the cars, scorned the Elmo's World coloring book, and packed the ice cream sandwich into the hot dog bun to eat them both together. With mustard. Yes, he was back.

Nurse Deniqua had also brought a big cup of coffee for Jill, and just in time; Jill was so exhausted, she was standing in sleep as if in a current of swift, cold water. She could not feel her feet, and her knees tingled and wobbled. She fell into the chair next to the bed and washed her face in the hot steam from the cup.

"Dr. Hudson's coming in a few minutes," said Deniqua, sweeping the other nurses ahead of her through the curtain.

"When can we leave?" Jill asked.

"Not till we know what's up with the little guy," said Deniqua. "I brought creamer and sugar, in case you need them. He's doing a lot better, but you just press the button if you need us, okay?"

“Thanks,” said Jill. She swirled the sugar into her coffee and drank it as quickly as she could. It burned in her throat, but the black tide of sleep rose up in her. Coffee and sleep met in the root of her throat, just above her heart – a storm of acid, a whirlpool dragging her down. Skyler, too, was drifting away, but his was a rosy, healthy sleep, with his lips pouting, as if someone had offended him in his dreams. She slid the ice cream hot dog sandwich from his hands and threw it away. The hospital bed wobbled, bulging and swaying like a wind-blown curtain as her eyes began to close.

“I guess it’s been a long night,” said the new doctor.

Jill opened her eyes. This was the fifth doctor of the night, and the youngest, if he was really a doctor at all. The pimples around the hairline, the stupid little pointy beard: he looked more like a custodian than a doctor. What kind of doctor had tattoos, anyway? A green snake coiled down his left arm, its tail wrapped around his wrist. “Skyler’s getting some rest, huh?” the new doctor said. “We’re going to have to wake him up for one more test.”

Jill set her jaw. If this fake doctor, this kid, put one finger on Skyler, if he pulled out a needle, she would scream the walls down; she would pick up her chair and beat his brains in. But he leaned toward her, too close and too sudden, as the doctors had done all night, and his blue scrubs smelled of the same chemical soap, his hands of the same baby-powder-scented sanitizer, as Nurse Deniqua and all the rest of them. “Has Skyler’s pediatrician ever talked to you about cystic fibrosis?” he asked.

“Is it like a virus?”

“No, no,” the new doctor said soothingly. He reached over to the hospital bed and pushed the dark brown hair off Skyler’s face. Skyler muttered and batted at the doctor’s hand, but did not open his eyes. “Does he always sweat so much when he sleeps?” the doctor asked. Even in this cool room, the curtain whispering with the heat pump’s constant breath, Skyler’s forehead was damp. His hair separated into big separate curls, wet an inch from the roots. The doctor ran his finger along Skyler’s hairline.

“Does he need antibiotics?” Jill asked. “Because his co-pay’s real high – if you had some samples –”

The doctor put his finger to his lips, sniffed, and licked it, tasting Skyler’s sweat.

Jill could not believe it. “What,” she said, “what did you just do?”

“Does he always taste so salty?”

“Get away!” Jill found the call button next to the bed and pressed her thumb down on it. “Get away from my baby! Get out of here!”

Footsteps, and the curtain rings screamed along the rod as Deniqua hurried in. “Ms. Norwood, is he having trouble breathing again?” She checked the clip on Skyler’s finger. “Dr. Hudson, does he need

oxygen again? Sats are good, he's at ninety-five. Ms. Norwood, he's looking good. What's the problem?"

"Get that man out of here! He licked my baby."

"Morning, Deniqua. Was he tested for CF last night?"

"What?" And now Deniqua's voice changed; now when Skyler was flushing in his sleep, breathing deeply for the first time in days; now Deniqua's gentle square hand drew back from Skyler's face; now she shook her head, bit her lip, turned away from Jill's eyes.

"What?" said Jill. "What's wrong with my baby?"

"Probably just asthma," said Dr. Hudson; but the skin around his young eyes was pleated with compassion. "He's been tested for allergies?"

"Pollen. But it's winter, there's no pollen now. He's got bronchitis, or something, that flu that's been going round, half the kids in his daycare got sick last week. I gave him stuff from the store for his cough. It's grape flavored. Has he got pneumonia or something?"

But Dr. Hudson shook his head. The pleats ran deeper, white like the ribs of a shell in his tanned face. "There's no infection."

"It's been cold," said Jill. Skyler got sicker as the apartment got colder, even though she dressed him in his warmest sweatsuit and took him into her bed. If she didn't use the kerosene heater, she wouldn't be able to keep him warm at night. She'd have to turn the thermostat up if the heater was poisoning them; and the bills would pile up, she'd never be able to pay the power company, and they couldn't cut her off in January or February, but they'd do it in March. Late fees and interest and reconnection fees. She'd need six hundred dollars. The power company gave assistance, but she'd applied and they'd turned her down. There was no way. "The cold made him sick."

"No, I don't think so."

Deniqua cleaned a patch of Skyler's arm, taped down a plastic disk, and attached the electrodes. "How does that feel, kiddo?" Dr. Hudson asked.

"Tickles," said Skyler drowsily.

"What are you doing to my baby?"

"Hang in there, little guy," said Deniqua. Her pager buzzed, and she hurried away.

"This will test him for cystic fibrosis," Dr. Hudson explained to Jill. "We're running a current through his skin to stimulate the sweat glands, and then we'll test his sweat. People with CF can't regulate salt —" His voice went on and on; sleep flooded up through Jill's body into the back of her throat, filling her mouth with bitterness. She would not listen; she would get extra hours at the store, take Todd back to court for

child support, pay the power bill and keep Skyler warm, and he would be okay.

“He’s four,” Dr. Hudson said, “that’s late for a CF diagnosis, so if he has it at all, it’s a mild case. I’ll get some information for you.”

He wasn’t sick. Not really sick. Just a bad cold.

Dr. Hudson talked. She looked at him and nodded. Instead of listening, she stared at the largest pimple, a red crater capped with white, just where the fiberglass blond of his hair changed to the copper twist of his beard, half an inch forward of his right ear. Didn’t it hurt? Why didn’t he squeeze it? Or at least cover it with a band-aid or something? What kind of doctor would go around with a thing like that on his face? It was unsanitary.

The plastic disk on Skyler’s arm had a spiral tube and a pellet of blue dye. Skyler’s sweat traveled into the spiral, around and around; the thing turned blue as the dye spread. Even as she ignored the horrible things Dr. Hudson was saying to her, she felt them filling her, turning and turning, a permanent stain. Digestive enzymes. Life expectancy. She was so tired. Sleep filled her like salt water, a black sea under a black sky when she closed her eyes, and Dr. Hudson’s words, divorced from their meanings, fluttered and whirled over the oily waves. Mucus. Percussion. Steroids. Diagnosis. Lack of weight gain. Slow growth. Malabsorption of nutrients. Life expectancy was getting higher all the time, with the best treatment, as high as thirty-five.

Jill was twenty-six. “No,” she said.

“It’s not that bad,” Dr. Hudson said. “There are new treatments all the time. Ten years, twenty years, we’ll have gene therapies, effective treatment, maybe even a cure.”

Deniqua returned. “It’s done,” she said, the first words Jill had understood for – how long? Twenty minutes, half an hour? The nurse pulled the plastic disk off Skyler’s arm, and he flinched as it tugged on the fine hairs of his skin.

“But he’s only four,” Jill said.

“That’s good,” Dr. Hudson said. “Most kids who have CF are diagnosed before they’re six months old. He’s been healthy for a long time. This won’t take long. I’ll be back in forty minutes. Deniqua, tell the lab to put a rush on it.”

Deniqua left, taking all of Skyler’s future with her, a plastic disk sealed in a white Tyvek envelope. “How long till you know?” Jill asked.

“Two hours. You should try to get some rest.”

They were gone. Jill got into the bed with Skyler and cuddled him close. “I’m hungry,” he murmured.

He was so thin and so small; he had always been the smallest at daycare. But Jill herself was only five feet tall. She had always assumed that Skyler was merely short. Not that he was sick. Dying. Digestive enzymes, Dr. Hudson said. If Skyler had this disease, he would take digestive enzymes with every meal, otherwise he might starve; he might already be starving. Did the enzymes come as a pill, Jill wondered, or some kind of liquid medicine to add to Skyler's juice, or would he have to have a shot with every meal? How much of this would Todd's insurance cover, and for how long? For the rest of Skyler's life?

In the end they can't clear their lungs, Dr. Hudson said. Jill knew what that meant. Death by drowning.

Percussion. It was a kind of massage, Dr. Hudson said, a hard pounding on the quadrants of the lungs, to shake the mucus loose and force it out. Somebody would have to do that for Skyler, twice a day. You'll have to hit him hard or it won't do any good. We'll have a therapist teach you.

She looked at her watch. The hospital seemed to be a world without time: the light was always the same, people hurried past with their quick daytime footsteps even at three or four in the morning, there was always the smell of coffee from nearby, and always the mingled odors of antiseptic nearby and sewage not far away. But it was past seven, and she was due at work at eight. Even if she left this instant, she wouldn't have time to drop Skyler at daycare. And anyway, they wouldn't let him stay, not if he was sick.

"Ms. Norwood," Deniqua said.

Jill twitched; she had not seen Deniqua arrive. She got out of the bed, pulled the thin blanket up to Skyler's chin, and set her face against Deniqua. Good news, bad news, she would not cry.

"It'll be another hour," Deniqua said. "I came to tell you, the business office called up from downstairs. There's a problem with your insurance card."

"It's my ex-husband's card. Skyler's on his insurance."

"Yes. The card's expired. Don't you have a new card?"

"Todd didn't send me one. I'll have to get it from him."

"Yes," said Deniqua. "The business office called him, and he says he didn't renew Skyler's coverage. I'm sorry, Ms. Norwood. Do you have some other insurance?"

Jill gave a hard, skeptical laugh. "But he's got to keep Skyler on his policy. It's in the divorce. The judge said."

"Ms. Norwood." Deniqua leaned forward and clasped Jill's hands, which all by themselves had begun to strangle one another. "Ms. Norwood. Somebody's got to sign the papers and be responsible for Skyler's

bills. You'll have to go down to the business office. They'll work something out with you. And then you should go see a lawyer."

Jill laughed again. "Like I can afford that."

"You can't afford not to," said Deniqua. "Not if he's sick. There's a legal office downstairs. They'll work with you. They'll help you. There are programs for CF, if that's what he's got. If your ex is supposed to be responsible for Skyler's medical expenses –"

"He's not sick. He's not sick. It's just a bad cold."

"Okay then." Deniqua squeezed Jill's hands one more time. "You still have to go downstairs and talk to them. The legal office opens at nine."

"I start work at eight," said Jill, but Deniqua was already gone. And she had to go to work. The power company wouldn't shut her off, but there would be another electricity bill, the same two hundred dollars for January plus however much more for February, and even with the heat at fifty she was burning up money. Plus late fees.

Todd canceled Skyler's insurance? But he couldn't do that. It was in the divorce.

So is child support in the divorce, Jill reminded herself, and if it was only a day late and a dollar short, you'd thank God on your knees. Three hundred dollars a month. If Todd would only pay it, that would almost cover the next power bill. She checked her watch again: seven twenty-three.

"Come on, kiddo," she said quietly, stroking Skyler's cheek. "Got to wake up, sweetie. Come on. Wake up for Mama."

"Sleepy," he said, nestling closer.

"You slept all night, baby. Come on, we got to go. You're coming to work with me today."

"Don't wanna." But he sat up obediently, her sweet child, and held up his arms for her to slip the sweatshirt over his head. His lips and cheeks were pink now, not deadly white as they had been at midnight; and just because a kid was thin, and had a bad cold, didn't mean he was really sick – did it? But Nurse Deniqua would be back in an hour and a half, and then Dr. Hudson would tell her that her baby's death was written at the moment his life began. Her marriage to Todd had been a disaster from the beginning, with Skyler the only good thing that came out of it; and Skyler was hopelessly damaged before he took his first breath. Genetic disorder, Dr. Hudson said. Two bad copies of the gene. You couldn't have known, there was nothing you could have done. One bad gene from her, one from Todd. They weren't good for each other. They couldn't live together, they couldn't stay faithful to each other, they couldn't even be kind to one another. They couldn't make a healthy child.

Jill slipped Skyler's shoes on his feet and Velcro'd the straps. She picked him up, hoisted him onto her hip, and stood with one hand on the curtain, listening. Voices at the next bed, footsteps moving away, Deniqua's voice saying, "No, a black Sharpie. Where did they all go?"

Jill stuffed the white envelope into her purse and said, "Let's get out of here." She walked quickly down the hall, but her shoes were quieter than the nurses' and nobody looked up to see her go. Instead of waiting for the elevator, she went straight for the stairs, through the lobby, past the business office without breaking her stride, out through the front portico, across to the parking tower and up two flights of steps, not waiting for the elevator. She tumbled Skyler into the back seat of the Honda, and he laughed because she was laughing. She was breathless because of the steps. He was breathless because of the slime in his lungs. "We made it!" she said with a cough.

"Made it," Skyler echoed, cough and all. "Go home now."

"Got to get to work, sweetie. You stay with me and be quiet, and I'll give you a treat later on. Gonna be a good boy, Sky?"

"Be good," Skyler agreed.

At first, she thought they might get away with it. She tucked Skyler in under her cash register at the salvage grocery, making him a little nest with his train blankie, his flop-eared green bunny, and the new cars the nurses had given him; he curled up, using the bunny as a pillow. Jill smeared concealer under her eyes and pink lip gloss on her mouth, scrubbed her teeth with a tissue, and pulled on her bright yellow smock. Skyler's breath crackled and rattled at her feet, a thing of its own, separate from him. Percussion, Dr. Hudson said. She would have to learn to hit Skyler. She would have to beat the mucus out of his lungs every day, or he would drown in it.

After all the times she had hit him, all the times she had sworn never to do it again. The quick hand to the back of his head when he knocked her coffee over; the slaps on his arms and hands when he grabbed for things in the grocery aisles; the pants-down paddling when he ran out in the parking lot, between two parked SUVs into the path of a minivan. Her hands remembered all these blows, and she smacked the customers' groceries across the scanner harder and harder. Cans, boxes, jars; she pounded them for their mischief and disobedience, and the trouble they caused her, while her tears built a wall across her eyes.

She worked without seeing, without thinking; it was not a job that required much of her sight or thought, especially since this was Wednesday, the day before delivery. The salvage grocery's regular customers knew that on Wednesday the milk was two days away from expiration, and only the dented cans were left. Thursday, that was when the lines were ten deep at every register, before the good stuff

was all picked over. Jill ran the groceries across the scanner, ignoring the customers' greetings. She listened to Skyler's bubbling breath, wetter and wetter as the hours passed. He woke up, but not completely. He leaned against her legs, hugging the blue bunny and dragging another mouthful of air into the swamp of his lungs, and then another.

By now, Dr. Hudson had the results of Skyler's test. But Jill already knew. Life expectancy, he had said. Thirty-five, like that was a good thing. There are new treatments all the time. Thirty-five, and Skyler was four. He would drown, but it would take him thirty-one years to die. Another breath, and another. If Nurse Deniqua were there, with the clip on Skyler's finger, the oxygen number would be going down again.

Something cracked, and her hands were full of cold horror. "What did you do?" said an indignant voice. "I'm not paying for those!"

Jill wiped her eyes and looked at her hands, wrist-deep in clear slime. A yellow globe slipped down the palm of her right hand, hesitated, and crawled between her fingers. A second hesitated at the lip of the conveyor, gathered itself in the crack, and slowly squeezed through. Jill stared without understanding, and after several seconds her weary mind offered the word eggs. She had gripped a carton of eggs so hard, scanned them so roughly, that she had burst the carton and smashed the eggs all over her station. The customer, a young woman with expensive wheat-blond hair, drew back from the mess. "What is wrong with you?" she asked.

Jill shook her head.

"All I wanted was a dozen eggs and a cantaloupe!" said the customer. Her high, furious voice drew the manager, Bob Valette, out of his office. "And you throw them at me!" the woman complained. "What did I ever do to you?"

Jill's eyes fastened on the woman's necklace, a knot of gold on her clean white t-shirt: three baby shoes with birthstones, two purple and one blue. None of this woman's children were sick, she was sure; not one of them had suffocated in the night, drowning in the tide of his own lungs. Not this woman, with her pink sneakers with the laces white as paper, her unstained t-shirt, her gold hoop earrings. Why would a woman like this shop at the salvage grocery, anyway? She probably met her friends for lunch at one of those places with the four-dollar coffees, where she boasted that she'd bought eggs for eighty-nine cents and a cantaloupe for a dollar seventeen. Jill grabbed the cantaloupe and smashed it to the floor at the woman's feet. Orange flesh cracked open and the air filled with musk.

"Ma'am," said Bob Valette smoothly, "let me get you a new melon," and he took her back into the aisles, giving Jill a look that told her that if she weren't the only cashier on duty, she'd have been fired that

very moment.

“I quit, anyway!” Jill yelled. “And I know you’ve been changing the dates on the meat!” She dragged Skyler from under her register. He whined and dragged his heels, then set up a shriek when he realized she was leaving his train blankie behind. “Okay, then!” she rapped out. She slapped his bottom hard, but let him run back for the blankie.

“I want to go home,” Skyler sobbed.

“We’re going.” She dumped him in the car seat, but didn’t bother with the clips. He wailed; she could not stand the noise. “Shut up!” she shouted, and the wail sank into a bubbling, choking sob, which was even worse. “Stop it, stop it, stop it,” she said. She pulled into the gas station across the street, laid her head on the steering wheel, and sobbed. Skyler crawled over the seat, curled up in her lap, and put his arms around her neck. For a while, they cried together; then they simply sat, keeping each other warm as the car got colder and colder. Jill hugged him and said, “Baby, what do you want?”

“Happy Meal,” he said instantly.

She couldn’t afford it, but that made no difference now. “Fine,” she said. “Just let me make a phone call. You get in your seat, go on.” He climbed into the back and curled himself into the car seat, and Jill pulled out her cell phone and called Todd to leave him a message.

He was home. She didn’t stop to wonder why he was home at eleven in the morning on a Wednesday; she simply screamed at him, “Where’s Skyler’s health insurance, you cheap bastard?”

“Jill –”

“I’ll have you back in court in a hot minute! He’s sick and there’s no insurance. What is wrong with you?”

“Jilly, there’s no insurance.”

“I know that! That’s what I said. He’s sick, don’t you get it? You have to keep him on your insurance. It’s in the divorce. And you haven’t paid child support since November.”

“Don’t you listen to your messages? I called you ten times. My job’s been cut. They’ve put me on hourly, twenty hours a week, and I lost my benefits.”

“What about Sky’s insurance? You’re supposed to cover him.”

“I got no insurance to cover him with.”

“And the child support –”

“I filed papers to reduce it. I told you, they cut me back to half time.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

"You got to do what we all do. You got to make it work."

"He's sick, Todd. Listen to me, he's real sick. You got to listen."

"Is that Daddy?" Skyler asked. "Can I talk to my Daddy, can I?"

"No," said Jill, snapping the phone shut. "He's got nothing to say to you. Come on," she said, forcing cheerfulness into her voice over his rising whine of protest, "let's go get you that Happy Meal, huh? And a hot fudge sundae, what do you say?"

Skyler accepted the meal and the Iron Man figure that came with it; and when she let him eat the sundae before the hamburger, he forgave her everything, spending the ride home dipping his fries into the hot fudge and blowing bubbles in his milk. When they got back to the apartment, Jill turned the heat up to seventy-five and smiled at Skyler. He was covered in ketchup and fudge sauce. "What's your luck, that both your parents lose their job at the same time?" she asked him. He offered her a fudge fry with his most charming grin, and she accepted both. "And how about a bath, mister fudgey-face?" she asked.

"With bubbles?"

"Sure. All the bubbles you want. How do you feel?"

"Choky."

"You want to go to the hospital again?"

"No," he said instantly. "No. No needles."

"Okay. No needles. But you got to take your medicine like a good boy, and not throw it on the floor like last night. You gonna be a good boy?"

Skyler considered. He pouted, and glanced at her sidelong under his black lashes. "Medium good," he suggested. She laughed, and he laughed with her.

"Okay, kiddo. Let's get you in the bath." She ran the water eight inches deep, and half a bottle of bubble bath made a three-foot mound of foam. Skyler disappeared in it, giggling with excitement. She listened to the bright joy in his laugh, and tried not to hear the wet, heavy breath.

Since October, when Skyler began to be sick all the time, she'd been buying infant strength cough elixir, because it was stronger than children's medicine. Two droppers of infants' elixir was the same as one child's dose, and the bottle cost twice as much but lasted three times as long. She poured the last of the grape juice into a glass and measured the elixir into it, dropper by dropper. Three doses, seven, twelve: the whole bottle. "Skyler," she said as she returned to the bathroom.

He opened a tunnel in the bubbles and peered out at her. "No medicine."

"Yes medicine. I put it in your juice. You drink it all up now, every bit."

He sighed, but took the cup. She laid her hand on his head and watched as he drained the glass. "I'm a good boy," he said, with another sideways look.

"You are my best boy. You want to watch TV? Bob the Builder's on."

Skyler cheered and splashed. She drained the bath, dried him and dressed him in his clean pajamas. While he curled up on the couch to watch Bob the Builder and his friends catch a family of runaway bunnies and build them a beautiful new hutch, she changed the sheets and plugged the kerosene heater into the wall. There was a smoke alarm in Skyler's room and another in the bedroom; when Skyler was a few weeks old, another building in the complex had caught fire, and the building's alarms hadn't worked, so Todd had bought and installed all these alarms. She took them down one by one, removed their batteries, and tied them all into a plastic bag, which she left on the kitchen table, along with Skyler's hospital wristband.

The warnings on the medicine bottle said it caused drowsiness. When she went back into the living room, Skyler was already asleep, his hand soft around his new Iron Man. She carried him into her bed, tucked the blue bunny in under his chin, and lay down with him.

The heater hissed in its corner. Jill pressed her head against Skyler's back and listened to the wet, busy noise of his lungs. She took a deep breath and wondered if she could taste something in the room, some change in the air, but she felt nothing; only the warmth on her face, only Skyler's small body filling with air and releasing it. She kissed his forehead and his firm cheek, tasting salt. Was he already breathing more slowly? She couldn't tell. She felt nothing but sleep, creeping out from her bones, flooding every channel in her body, sleep running through her blood, sleep spinning behind her eyes. Sleep filled her as water filled sand, wrapping every cell of her body in its dark skin. This time there would be no alarm. This time she could rest.

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